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ABSTRACT

Parental sex-typed perceptions of infants at two different ages were examined in this study. Twenty-nine primiparous couples were recruited from a local hospital where they had been participating in various childbirth and child-care education programs. Sixteen were parents of boys, and 13 were parents of girls. First when their children were 5 to 9 months old and again when they were 12 to 17 months old, all parents completed questionnaires consisting of 20 bipolar word pairs arranged on 7-point scales. Parents were asked to circle the point on the scale which most closely represented their perception of their child. Results indicated that both parents' perceptions of daughters differed rather consistently and often significantly from perceptions of sons. On both questionnaire administrations, boys were seen as more aggressive, firmer, bigger, calmer, rougher, more stubborn, and less easily scared than girls. For the second administration only, boys were regarded as significantly noisier and less cuddly than girls. It was concluded that, at both ages, parents do stereotype their infants according to sex. (MP)

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(3) N/A

(4) Parents of first-born children responded to a questionnaire concerning perceptions of their infants at age 5-9 months, and again when their children were 12-17 months old. Half were parents of boys, half of girls. At both ages, parents tended to perceive their children in sex-stereotypic fashion.

(5) Developmental, Infant, Sex Differences

(6) No slides

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(1) Title of Paper

Parental sex-typed perceptions of their infants at two different ages

(2) Topical Session Preference

Developmental, Infant, Sex Differences

(3) Problem

It seems palpably clear that sex-role stereotypes exist, and there is general agreement among both men and women concerning the specific adjectives that are used in this stereotyping process (Williams & Bennett, 1975). However, debate still rages over whether these stereotypes are a cause or an effect of actual sex differences. In attempting to address this question, it seems fruitless to study individuals beyond a certain age, since the socialization process confounds nature with nurture, making it impossible to separate their effects.

When infants are studied, two trends become apparent. First, few if any consistent and significant sex differences emerge (Birns, 1976; Jacklin, Maccoby, & Dick, 1973; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Moss, 1974). The second trend is that parents and others do perceive and behave toward infants differentially as though sex differences do exist (Condry & Condry, 1976; Fagot, 1974; Gurwitz & Dodge, 1975; Lewis, 1972a, 1972b; Seavey, Katz, & Zalk, 1975; Sidorowicz & Lunney, 1980; Smith & Lloyd, 1978).

The parental sex-stereotyping process begins as early as the first 24 hours of life (Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria, 1974). However, no study to date has attempted to tap parental perceptions when their children were beyond the neonatal stage, and before the toddler stage when socialization has already had sufficient impact to produce observed sex differences. If such differences in perception do appear, when in reality we know that actual differences are at best weak and inconsistent, this result would indicate support for the social learning explanation of sex role differentiation and development.

(4) Subjects

The subjects were 29 primiparous couples recruited from a local hospital at which they had been participating in various childbirth and child-care education programs. Sixteen were parents of boys, and 13 were parents of girls.

(5) Procedure

The parents completed questionnaires consisting of 20 bipolar word pairs arranged on seven-point scales (see Table 1). Parents were asked to circle the point on the scale which most closely represented their perception of their child. The parents first completed the questionnaires when their children were 5-9 months old. They were contacted again over half a year later, and completed the questionnaires a second time, when their children were 12-17 months old. For this second questionnaire administration, two sets of parents failed to

participate, reducing the sample size to 15 sets of parents of boys, and 12 sets of parents of girls.

(6) Results

The means for each of the 20 scaled items are displayed in Table 1 as a function of sex of infant for the two questionnaire administrations. The evaluations of daughters differed rather consistently and often significantly from those of sons, collapsing across sex of the parents. Only two items reached statistical significance on both administrations: Boys were seen as significantly more sturdy and more masculine. However, eight other items either approached significance on both administrations, or were significant for one and approached significance for the other: Boys were seen as more aggressive, firmer, bigger, calmer, rougher, more daring, more stubborn, and less easily scared than girls. Finally, for the second (12-17 months old) administration only, boys were perceived as significantly noisier and less cuddly than girls.

(7) Implications and Conclusions

The major finding of this study was the demonstration that parents stereotype their infants in a sex-typed fashion, in spite of the absence of "objective" measurable sex differences. As Rubin, Provenzano, & Luria (1974) pointed out, this process begins at birth, with the stereotyping centering on physical traits, such as big-little. By the time the infants have reached the age of 5-9 months, this stereotyping extends to

psychological traits (such as delicate-sturdy), as well. By pre-school age, most of these stereotypes have indeed become true (Birns, 1976). The question is, do these parental perceptions somehow translate themselves into differential behavior which then produces these differences? Or are our behavioral measures too insensitive to detect these differences during infancy, differences which the parents (somehow) <u>are</u> able to discern? Alternatively, it might be that these parental perceptions are indeed only "in the eye of the beholders," yet are without any effect on their infants who are destined to develop these sex differences biologically over the next several years of maturation.

Of these three competing explanations, the first seems to be the most compelling, and has received some indirect empirical support (Goldberg & Lewis, 1969; Lewis, 1972a, 1972b; Seavey, Katz, & Zalk, 1975). More recently, a combination of social-learning and cognitive-developmental explanations has received some theoretical support. Lewis & Weinraub (1979) hypothesized that even if differential parental reinforcement does not contribute directly to the development of sex-typed behavior, it may still serve to establish in the child's mind that, "... rewards can be obtained by conforming to sex-appropriate standards.... The child's task may be to develop sex-role knowledge and to choose appropriate-sexed behaviors." This approach is in substantial agreement with that of Constantinople (1979), who claimed that infants may have an inherent readiness to attend to gender-related stimuli. Thus parents may provide

sex-typed labels which are readily absorbed by their children due to differential reinforcement and observational learning. Once the label "boy" or "girl" has been internalized, it provides a cue for subsequent behavior.

Further extensions of the present study are mandatory, studies which would assess early parental perceptions of and behaviors toward their children, and subsequent actual development of the children over the first four or five years of life. It would be interesting to see if parents interact with their children as a function of how they perceive them, or as a function of how they actually develop. A longitudinal study might help to discriminate between these two explanations, especially if it turns out that parental perceptions and biases (such as the importance they place on the masculinity or femininity of their child) differ before their infant's behavior differentiates itself, and the behavior develops in accord with the parental perceptions and biases. If this is indeed the case, the "eye of the beholder" effect might then be extended from a mere perceptual phenomenon to one that has actual impact on behavior.

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Table 1

Mean Parental Ratings for 20 Bipolar Adjectives as a Function of Sex and Age of Infant

Bipolar Adjectives	Sex and Age of Infants			
	5-9 Months		12-17 Months	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Delicate-Sturdy	6.25 **	4.77	6.10 **	4.92
Aggressive-Unaggressive	2.75 *	3.38	2.30 *	2.63
Shy-Outgoing	5.56 *	5.12	5.57	5.79
Fussy-Easy Going	5.13	5.46	4.90	5.25
Quiet-Noisy	4.56	4.19	5.10 **	4.29
Messy-Neat	4.09	4.23	4.00	3.92
Firm-Soft	3.28 *	4.08	2.60 *	3.46
Whiny-Uncomplaining	4.97	5.19	4.37 *	4.83
Active-Inactive	1.56	1.65	1.13 *	1.29
Sociable-Unsociable	1.69	1.96	1.60	1.58
Interested in People-Objects	2.69 *	3.50	3.03	2.92
Masculine-Feminine	1.78 **	5.96	1.43 **	6.00
Cuddly-Not Cuddly	1.81	1.65	2.93 **	2.00
Big-Little	2.59 **	3.73	3.00 *	3.83
Dependent-Independent	3.88	3.58	5.00	4.92
Excitable-Calm	3.38 **	2.42	3.20 *	2.67
Gentle-Rough	4.28 *	3.77	5.03 **	4.38
Daring-Cautious	2.28 **	2.96	2.33 *	2.79
Stubborn-Not Stubborn	2.91 **	3.54	2.23 *	2.58
Easily-Not Easily Scared	4.31 *	3.54	4.73 *	4.04

* Approached Significance ($.05<p<.15$) ** $p<.05$

NOTE- The larger the mean, the more the perception was in the direction of the second (right-hand) adjective in each pair.